

Lingering trauma of a black September

Memories of the gruesome Tamei massacre haven't faded for the Kukis as they continue to observe a traditional rite every year until the crime is resolved according to their customary laws



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Twenty-eight years ago, on 13 September, 88 innocent civilians, including a multitude of women and children, were gruesomely murdered near Tamei in Tamenglong district. On the same day, three men from Nungthut in Tamenglong district and 17 villagers from Santing were also murdered, making it 108 people in total. It is the highest number of people murdered in a single day in modern Manipur history.

They were killed not because they had committed a crime or disobeyed a diktat but because they belonged to a particular ethnic group. Yet no criminal case was registered against the perpetrators. The stark ethnic cleansing campaign cost more than a thousand innocent lives and more than 100,000 people were internally displaced in 1993.

Blood-soaked harvest season

It was a time when the summer heat had slowly faded, and the much-awaited autumn of 1993 was at hand in the Jampi area in the far North-western hills of Manipur bordering Nagaland. For *jhumias* in the Jampi hills, and elsewhere, it was not only

the arrival of a pleasant season but also when the fruits of hard labour were harvested for the first time in the year with gladness and merrymaking filling villages.

The anticipation for autumn was short-lived, particularly for the villagers of Joupi and Janglenphai, as conflicts between the Kukis and Nagas were brewing in other parts of the state. A "quit notice" was served by the Naga Lim Guard, a proxy armed group of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), in the first week of September 1993. Dated 3 September, it informed all Kuki villagers of Tamenglong district "to leave the land within 10 (ten) days w.e.f. the receive (sic) of this ultimatum". It also warned that "failing to comply this ultimatum we will not be responsible for the dire consequences (sic)". The notice was also marked as "most urgent" in an additional handwritten note.

The Jampi area in the northern part of the present Tamenglong district served as a buffer during early British colonial rule. While writing the ethnography of the Angami Nagas, John Henry Hutton mentions how the Katcha Nagas invited the Kukis to defend them, "The Kacha Naga vil-

lages had begun to call in Kukis to defend them against raiders from Khonoma (Angamis), which maintained a fluctuating suzerainty over the Kacha Naga villages".

Alexander Mackenzie's "Memorandum on the North-East Frontier of Bengal" of 1869, which is largely regarded as "an authoritative historical source" today on the relations of the British colonial government with the hill tribes of the North-east frontier, also mentions something similar on the role of Kukis during colonial rule. He reported that the Kukis "...were ready at once to avenge an inroad, and, using bows and arrows instead of spears, were much respected even by the Angamis. Before the establishment of the Naga Hills District, proposals were frequently made to utilise these Kookies as a buffer or screen between our more timid subjects and the Angamis". Angami raids stopped after the settlement of Kukis in the buffer areas, and it not only gave a reality check to the British but also several tribes around the "Angami country".

Coming back to 1993, according to the Naga Lim Guard's diktat, villagers of Joupi and Janglenphai left what had been their homes for gener-

ations. On the way to Sadar Hills, they were intercepted near Tamei and the captors let loose a reign of terror. The villagers were massacred because they happened to be Kukis. This hated ethnic identity is not a creation by themselves but given by the British for classification and easier governance. The Naga Lim Guard gave itself *carte blanche* to decide who lived or died and in what manner.

The contributions of those settled in the buffer areas, which stopped raiding and enslaving in the North-western hills of Manipur and brought about peace and order, were hardly ever recognised. But the lingering remnants of Jadonang's "Naga raj" where, as Robert Reid reported while he was the Governor of Assam, "he would overthrow the existing (British) administration and enable them to take revenge on the hated Kukis" seemed eventually realised.

Survivors & the longing for peace

Today, survivors of the Tamei massacre, and other related mass killings, live a life of trauma — alone and unhealed. The world of those who escaped the massacre at Tamei fell apart as they lost everything, including their beloved land, which

housed the village and their shelters for more than a century. The memories of the trauma will not fade in their lifetimes.

Some survivors bear the scars of machete attacks, while some mothers live with the memory of their babies being thrown into the air to fall onto the blades of spears. During the 25th year of the incident in 2018, survivors gathered to share their traumatic experiences. A quinquagenarian, who escaped the execution, expressed his inability to forget how his elder brother was butchered on that fateful night; the screams, bloodshed and wailing continue to haunt him. Another mother from Jampi village narrated the ordeal of how she could not save her child when the attackers found out that he was a boy. He was stabbed to death in front of her eyes.

Ethno-territorial movements in the North-east often produce conflicts between ethnic groups in which innocent people pay the price of being grouped and categorised within a given ethnic identity. Since late 1995, Kukis have been observing "Sahnit-Ni", a traditional rite or black day, on 13 September every year.

The lingering ethnophobia can be reduced through certain political interventions. And indeed, both Kuki and Naga insurgent groups are currently engaging with the Centre to bring about acceptable solutions. Apart from certain forms of autonomy, there is also a need to give exceptional Constitutional treatment to bring lasting peace and thereby ensure democratic rights to both electorates.

The exceptional Constitutional arrangement is to bifurcate the Outer Manipur Parliamentary constituency or add another Parliamentary constituency, from the hill areas, into the North and South Manipur Parliamentary constituencies. Such a political arrangement for the area can reduce the quinquennial struggle where the salience of ethnicity was reinforced by conflicts between the two groups during each past election. It is only through the said arrangement that deepening of democracy can happen where individual rights are ensured otherwise ethnic voting or cross-ethnic voting will be at full play and enforced by different entities.

The Kuki Inpi Manipur, an apex body of the Kukis, have demanded that the NSCN-IM, being perpetrators of the massacre, should formally apologise for their crimes and perform the Kuki customary rite "Tol-theh", or the practice of cleansing the house for shedding blood and pay "Luongman", an *ex gratia* for the deaths. They are, however, unacceptable to the NSCN-IM as they refuse to apologise. And therefore, the long, lingering observance of "Sahnit-Ni" will continue.

The survivors of the Tamei massacre cannot overcome their trauma even after 28 years of the tragic incident. It will linger in their memory — a memory of hate and murder, of losing their loved ones and homes, which cannot be erased by any inducement.